



What is hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A, also called infectious hepatitis, is an infection of the liver caused by the hepatitis A virus.

Who is at risk for hepatitis A?

Anyone can get hepatitis A, but those at greater risk include:

- People who live with or have sex with people who have the disease.
- Men who have sex with men.
- Injection and non-injection drug users.
- People traveling to countries where hepatitis A infection is common.

Hepatitis A sometimes spreads among young children in day care because many are in diapers and cannot wash their own hands, and no one knows they have the disease because they have no symptoms. Spreading among school-aged children is less common because they are more likely to have symptoms, and most have learned to wash their hands before eating and after using the toilet.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis A?

Adults and teens are more likely to have symptoms. Symptoms may include fever, tiredness, loss of appetite, nausea, abdominal discomfort, dark urine, pale stools or jaundice (i.e., yellowing of skin or whites of eyes). Children younger than 6 often have few or no symptoms. Hepatitis A symptoms generally last less than two months. Prolonged or relapsing illness can last up to one year, but this is rare.

How soon do symptoms appear?

It can take from 15 to 50 days to get sick after being exposed to the hepatitis A virus. The average is about a month.

How is hepatitis A spread?

The hepatitis A virus is usually found in the stools (feces) of infected people. The virus is most likely to spread when people do not wash their hands after using the toilet or changing a diaper or soiled sheets, then touch their own mouths, prepare food for others, or touch others with their contaminated hands. This spreads the disease from person to person. It can also be spread by contaminated food (such as shellfish) or water.

When and for how long is a person able to spread the disease?

A person infected with hepatitis A is most likely to spread the disease during the two weeks before symptoms begin. Most people stop being contagious one week after their symptoms start. Unlike other hepatitis viruses, hepatitis A virus is usually not spread by blood.

How is a person diagnosed?

A blood test looks for antibodies that fight the virus. This blood test can tell the difference between a current infection and a past one. There are also blood tests to measure how much damage has been done to the liver, but these tests do not show what caused the damage.

What is the treatment?

There are no special medicines or antibiotics that can be used to treat a person once the symptoms appear; the only treatment is supportive care.

Does past infection make a person immune?

Once an individual recovers from hepatitis A, he or she is immune for life and does not continue to carry or spread the virus.

Should children or others be excluded from day care, school, work or other activities if they have Hepatitis A?

Yes:

- Children with the disease should be excluded for one week after onset of illness.
- Adults with the illness, especially those who work as food handlers, should be excluded for one week after onset of illness.
- Children should be excluded if they are unable to participate in routine activities, need more care than can be provided by staff, or meet other exclusion criteria, such as fever with behavioral change.

What can be done to prevent the spread of hepatitis A?

A vaccine is currently available and routinely recommended for all children ages 12 to 23 months. The vaccine is also available for anyone who wants to be protected from hepatitis A. The single most effective way to prevent spread is careful hand washing after using the toilet or after diaper changing. Also, infected people should not handle foods during the contagious period. Household members, day-care contacts, or others in close contact with an infected person should call a doctor or the state health department to obtain immune globulin, which minimizes the chances of becoming ill. In normal working and classroom situations, contacts do not need to receive immune globulin.

Additional Information:

Additional information is available at www.ndhealth.gov/disease or by calling the North Dakota Department of Health at 800.472.2180.

This disease is a reportable condition. As mandated by North Dakota law, any incidence of this disease shall be reported to the North Dakota Department of Health.

Resource: American Academy of Pediatrics. [Section 3, Summaries of Infectious Diseases]. In: Pickering LK, ed. *Red Book: 2003 Report of the Committee on Infectious Diseases*. 26th ed. Elk Grove Village, IL: American Academy of Pediatrics; 2003:[page 309]



